

NEW ALBUMS

‘Even if it was only available by carrier-pigeon, it would still be a brilliant work.’





RADIOHEAD

In Rainbows

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Q CLASSIC

It arrived by unconventional means, but it's their most conventional work in a decade. And their best.

On 1 October 2007, just as Q's 21st anniversary issue hit newsstands celebrating the 21 artists who changed music, Radiohead included, their guitarist Jonny Greenwood posted a message on the band's Dead Air Space blog: "Well, the new album is finished and it's coming out in 10 days. We've called it In Rainbows." Their official website then offered a choice of pre-ordering either a £40 deluxe CD/vinyl "discbox" despatched in December or a direct download available the following Wednesday. Beyond a mandatory 45p handling charge, the latter cost as much as the buyer was willing to pay.

In the year where Prince upset music retailers by giving away his Planet Earth album free with a Sunday newspaper, this was an infinitely grander gesture: band make album then sell it to fans who name their own price, completely independent of any record company. Yet such altruism and its potential impact on a label-driven industry risked eclipsing the record itself. This, after all, was the eagerly-awaited seventh album from the band who 10 years ago, with 1997's OK Computer, set a sonic template for '00s arena giants Coldplay and Muse only to then make experimental art-rock a platinum-selling Number 1 commodity on both sides of the Atlantic with 2000's Kid A.

At least in sparking up debate about the disintegration of the record business, Radiohead were being consistent. Ever since Kid A, we've come to expect them to challenge the mainstream. Its 2001 sister album Amnesiac was no less obscure, while their previous, 2003's Hail To The Thief, was a sporadically beautiful but ultimately taxing exorcism of post-9/11 anguish enforcing their detractors' stereotype of Radiohead as unsmiling eggheads only capable of minor-key gloom.

Consequently, the disarming surprise of In Rainbows, their first in four years (excluding Thom Yorke's 2006 electronica-driven solo project The Eraser), is its relative accessibility. Bar some strange titles, random electronic blips and the otherworldly frills of producer Nigel Godrich, it's surprisingly straightforward: 10 songs averaging four minutes each, all with verses and choruses. Musically, it's the first time Radiohead haven't gone out of their way to push the envelope since 1995's The Bends.

Even so, 15 Step is a mischievous opening decoy, throwing the listener off any orthodox scent with its irregular 5/8 rhythm, sparse guitar and cheering children's chorus. As "experimental" as In Rainbows ever gets, it's conventional in every other sense, right down to Yorke's tense lyrics suggesting a relationship meltdown (a recurring theme). The drama then accelerates with Bodysnatchers, Yorke screaming, "I have no idea what I'm talking about" amid a guitar

fracas equal parts Nirvana's All Apologies and The Beatles' Within You Without You.

But it's with Nude that In Rainbows settles down, establishing a musical elegance it sustains till the very last. Written shortly after OK Computer, Nude has been the great "lost" Radiohead song for the past decade, undergoing umpteen transformations in concert. Finally executed here, it finds Yorke sounding angelic yet terrifying. "Don't get any big ideas/They're not going to happen," he warns over eerie strings sharing an epic grace with David Bowie's Space Oddity. From here on in, In Rainbows never ceases to deliver.

All I Need almost rivals Nude for heart-stopping

ABowie-esque balladry, this time evoking the Krautrock minimalism of Low's Warszawa: Yorke also doffs his cap to his post-punk heroes Magazine, quoting, "I'm [just] an insect" from 1980's A Song From Under The Floorboards. For a band whose work is so often typecast by OK Computer's dispassionate themes of alienation, these are very "human" songs. House Of Cards is, for Radiohead, unusually soulful, Yorke intoning, "I don't want to be your friend/I just want to be your lover" over a languid melody sailing close to Fleetwood Mac's Albatross. Jigsaw Falling Into Place could even be describing a lovers' quarrel, Yorke watching his partner "run away" as the music reaches a menacing finale not unlike the Eagles' Hotel California if thrashed out by The Smiths. Most emotional of all is the closing Videotape, a dying man's farewell address crooned over Yorke's melancholic piano figure. Like the

thinking man's equivalent of James Blunt's Goodbye My Lover, it seems destined for funeral services.

Only through the lessons learned on its predecessors could Radiohead have achieved In Rainbows' equilibrium of experimental technique with focused songwriting. Given the inclusion of the decade-old Nude and the forthcoming discbox featuring more re-recorded "lost" out-takes (among them the OK Computer-era Last Flowers), there's a sense that this may have been a mopping-up exercise. But In Rainbows still leaves Radiohead in the most enviable position: progressively perfecting their art while able to command autonomy beyond the record industry. For their few serious contenders, be it Coldplay or Arcade Fire, the gauntlet is down.

By virtue of its revolutionary release method alone, this is already an historic album. Had it arrived as a series of wax cylinders only available by carrier-pigeon, it wouldn't change the fact that In Rainbows is a brilliant work. Pay what you can reasonably afford for these 10 remarkable tracks. Once again, Radiohead have proven themselves priceless. ■ SIMON GODDARD

Fact File

DOWNLOAD:

Bodysnatchers

Nude

All I Need

House Of Cards

Jigsaw Falling Into Place

Videotape

RELEASE DATE: Out Now

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www.radiohead.com/

deadairspace



Thom Yorke's rock-walking skills were less developed than his friends.

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MAGAZINE

The Correct Use Of Soap VIRGIN, 1980 ★★★★★

An early influence on Radiohead, Magazine singer Howard Devoto's existentialist lyrics inspired Yorke's All I Need.



NIRVANA

In Utero GEFFEN, 1993 ★★★★★

Released the same year as Radiohead's debut album, Pablo Honey, the spirit of Nirvana's swansong lives on in Bodysnatchers.